

**IN THE CLAIMS:**

1. (Currently Amended) Apparatus for protecting a composite-body aircraft against damage from lightning strikes, ~~the apparatus comprising~~ comprising:

~~a Faraday cage defined on an exterior surface of the~~ an aircraft body including a plurality of composite panels; and

a plurality of electrically conductive coupling mechanisms which join the plurality of composite panels to each other at their respective edges, the plurality of electrically conductive coupling mechanisms having respective adjacent ends that are electrically coupled to each other to form a continuous, electrically conductive grid disposed on the exterior surface of the aircraft body.

2. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of Claim 1 ~~claim 1~~, wherein the ~~Faraday cage comprises a continuous, electrically conductive grid extends disposed on the exterior surface of the aircraft body and extending to the~~ its outermost lateral periphery of the aircraft body.

3. (Canceled)

4. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of Claim 1 ~~claim 3~~, wherein the respective adjacent ends of the electrically conductive coupling mechanisms ~~splice plates~~ are electrically coupled to each other by electrically conductive fasteners extending through respective ones of the adjacent ends of the coupling mechanisms ~~plates~~ and an electrically conductive strap extending between the respective adjacent ends thereof.

5. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of Claim 1 ~~claim 3~~, wherein the electrically conductive coupling mechanisms ~~splice plates~~ comprise titanium.

6. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of Claim 1 ~~claim 1~~, wherein the aircraft body comprises a blended-wing-body ("BWB") aircraft.

7. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of Claim 1 ~~claim 3~~, wherein the plurality of composite panels comprise graphite fibers.

8. (Currently Amended) The apparatus of Claim 1 ~~claim 2~~, wherein the aircraft body includes an electrical system, and wherein the electrically conductive grid comprises a ground return path of the electrical system.

9. (Currently Amended) A method for protecting a composite-body aircraft against damage from lightning strikes, ~~the method~~ comprising:

providing an aircraft body including a plurality of composite panels;  
coupling the plurality of composite panels to each other at the adjacent edges of  
the composite panels using electrically conductive coupling mechanisms; and  
electrically coupling respective adjacent ends of the conductive coupling  
mechanisms to each other to form a continuous, electrically conductive grid on the  
exterior surface of the aircraft body

~~defining a Faraday cage on an exterior surface of the aircraft.~~

10. (Currently Amended) The method of Claim 9 ~~claim 9~~, wherein the  
~~defining the Faraday cage comprises forming a continuous, electrically conductive grid~~  
~~on the exterior surface of the aircraft body that extends to the~~ its outermost lateral  
periphery of the exterior surface of the aircraft body.

11. (Canceled)

12. (Currently Amended) The method of Claim 9 ~~claim 11~~, wherein electrically coupling ~~connecting~~ the respective adjacent ends of the electrically conductive coupling mechanisms ~~splice plates~~ to each other comprises:

~~providing coupling~~ an electrically conductive bonding strap ~~that extends between~~  
~~to~~ the adjacent ends of the coupling mechanisms ~~plates~~; and, extending electrically  
conductive fasteners through respective ones of the adjacent ends ~~of the plates~~ and the  
bonding strap.

13. (Currently Amended) The method of Claim 9 ~~claim 11~~, wherein the  
electrically conductive coupling mechanisms ~~splice plates~~ comprise titanium.

14. (Currently Amended) The method of Claim 9 ~~claim 9~~, wherein the aircraft  
body comprises a blended-wing-body ("BWB") aircraft.

15. (Currently Amended) The method of Claim 9 ~~claim 11~~, wherein the  
plurality of composite panels comprise graphite fibers.

16. (Currently Amended) The method of Claim 9 ~~claim 10~~, wherein the  
aircraft body includes an electrical system, and wherein the electrically conductive grid  
comprises a ground return path of the electrical system.

17. (Currently Amended) The method of Claim 9, An Apparatus for  
~~protecting a composite body aircraft against damage from lightning strikes, the apparatus~~  
~~comprising:~~

~~a continuous, electrically conductive grid formed on the exterior surface of the~~  
~~aircraft, the grid comprising: wherein the plurality of composite panels comprise a~~  
plurality of polygonal composite panels; and

~~a plurality of exterior and interior splice plates joining each of the plurality of~~  
~~composite panels.~~